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**Better Learning Through Structured Teaching**

*by Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey*

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**Chapter 2. Focus Lessons: Establishing Purpose and Modeling**

The first phase of a gradual release of responsibility model is the focus lesson. This is the time when the teacher is demonstrating, modeling, and sharing his or her thinking with students. Although this segment may be brief (5–15 minutes), it is powerful. This is the time when the teacher uses the students' attention to introduce the concept, skill, or strategy they are to learn. This task is accomplished through one or more approaches designed to make the learning transparent to learners. The notion of transparency is critical to the focus lesson. In order for students to acquire new knowledge, they need to witness a more knowledgeable other (the teacher) using the strategy being demonstrated. Moreover, they need to be invited into the mind of that more knowledgeable other. This is accomplished by sharing one's thinking—making it transparent to students not only how it is done but how decisions are made in the successful completion of the task.

What Focus Lessons Are Not

Focus lessons are not intended as a time to ask students questions. During the focus lesson, the teacher should model his or her thinking and not interrogate students about their thinking. As such, the teacher should use a number of "I" statements, such as "I think …" or "I wonder …" or "I predict … ." The teacher should not turn the table during this phase of instruction and, after reading a passage aloud, ask students about their predictions, questions, inferences, or the like. Of course, the teacher can ask students to talk with a partner to practice the skill or strategy of the focus lesson following the teacher modeling. The important thing to remember is that students need modeling—examples—that they can incorporate into their habits.

Far too many students have been questioned about things they don't understand and have not been provided with the examples they need to be successful. As teachers, we commonly ask students questions for which we already have the answers. Students call this approach "Guess what's in the teacher's brain"; researchers call it initiate, respond, evaluate (I-R-E) (Cazden, 1988). A typical sequence of instruction, in the absence of teacher modeling, might go something like this:

*Teacher:* Why did Lewis and Clark want to explore the west? (Initiate)

*Student 1:* To discover California? (Respond)

*Teacher:* Well, not really. (Evaluate) What do others think? (Initiate)

*Student 2:* To get some gold? (Respond)

*Teacher:* No, not yet. (Evaluate) Before the Gold Rush, why did Lewis and Clark want to explore? (Initiate)

Clearly, the students do not know the answer that the teacher is looking for. Using a gradual release of responsibility model, the teacher would have first modeled his or her thinking, probably from a piece of text. Consider the difference when the teacher does so. In this case, the teacher reads aloud a portion of the letter President Thomas Jefferson wrote on June 20, 1803, to Meriwether Lewis:

The Object of your mission is to explore the Missouri river & such principal stream of it as by it's course and communication with the waters of the Pacific ocean, whether the Columbia, Oregon, Colorado or any other river may offer the most direct & practicable water communication across this continent for the purpose of commerce. (Lewis, Bergon, & Clark, 2003, p. xxiv)

During and after the reading of this passage, the teacher thinks aloud, sharing her understanding of the text. Along the way, she notes that the president of the United States is interested in a water route across the United States. She also notes that his purpose in forming the expedition is for commerce, or conducting business. In doing so, she facilitates her students' thinking about not only the reasons for the expedition but also how to read for information.

Focus lessons are also not the time to simply tell students things. The key to a quality focus lesson is *explaining*. As we will discuss later in this chapter, students need an explanation of their teachers' cognitive and metacognitive processes. As we discussed in Chapter 1, people don't really learn from being told. Learners need scaffolds and supports to process information. This need has implications for every classroom. As teachers, we should continually ask ourselves whether we are explaining or telling.

This question has profound implications for lectures in middle and high school. A good lecture lets the participants in on the thinking and does not simply regurgitate information that could have been read. What students do not need is an "information dump" from teacher to student. A good lecture should model critical thinking for students as the "teacher questions her own assumptions, acknowledges ethical dilemmas hidden in her position, refers to inconvenient theories, facts, and philosophies that she has deliberately overlooked, and demonstrates an openness to alternative viewpoints" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 19). The worthwhile lecture, though brief in nature, should convey new terms and concepts and draw connections between ideas as the lecturer explains the thinking behind the information.

In addition, the focus lesson is not a time in which students read aloud to the rest of the class. Although there are instructional reasons for students reading aloud, such as choral reading or for diagnostics, the focus lesson is not one of these times. As we like to say, the focus lesson is the time in which the person who is paid to be there reads or thinks aloud. Evidence indicates that asking students to read unfamiliar texts aloud to the whole class is harmful to the individual student and counterproductive for the rest of the class, as they are often hearing a disfluent reading (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998). The comedian Lily Tomlin still talks about an experience she had in 2nd grade. While reading aloud to the whole class, she mispronounced *island*. From that point on, she was teased at school and began to dislike not only school but also herself. It's pretty powerful when an experience from 2nd grade is still on your mind when you're in your 60s. What students need is for a fluent reader to read, explain, and share the thinking required of the text or the task (Duffy, 2003).

Key Features of Focus Lessons

Before we provide examples of strategies for developing and delivering focus lessons, let's explore two key features. First, all focus lessons should establish a purpose for the learning. Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock (2001) note that establishing purpose—setting objectives and providing feedback, as they call it—is one of the classroom instructional strategies that matters. Similarly, Hill and Flynn (2006) suggest that establishing purpose is critical to the success of English language learners. As they note, too many students don't know what to pay attention to or what really matters. As a result, students fail to learn the content they are exposed to.

Teachers establish purpose in a variety of ways. Unfortunately, in many districts, this good idea has been misapplied and minimized to a requirement for posting the standards on the wall. Simply posting standards on the wall is not establishing purpose with students. Students need to be involved in the process, to talk about the purpose, and to understand the goal of the instruction. Students need to be provided with clear explanations of the purpose and the activities that are linked with the purpose.

The types of purpose that are established also vary. As we noted in Chapter 1, teachers can establish purpose in three domains: content, language, and social. The example in Chapter 1 was from a mathematics classroom. Consider the following example from a science classroom. The teacher establishes purpose immediately following the writing prompt that students responded to upon entering the classroom. The prompt for this 4th grade classroom read, "When a little kid asks me about a food chain, I will explain it like this … ." The teacher says:

As you know or could predict from our writing prompt, we're still focused on the food chain. Today, we're going to focus on the primary source of matter and energy in the food chain—plants. We need to learn more about plants as a source of matter and energy. In doing so, I want to be sure that we're paying attention to our key terms: producers, and consumers such as herbivores, carnivores, omnivores, and decomposers. I also want to make sure that we remember to write in complete sentences, not fragments. And, finally, our social goal for the week is to actively listen while others are speaking. To accomplish these things, I'll be reading and talking about plants with you, and then you'll be reading, talking, and writing. Some of you will be on computers doing Internet research; others will be reading more about decomposers such as fungi, insects, and microorganisms that recycle matter from dead plants and animals; and others will watch a short film about this.

Establishing the purpose is a critical component of the focus lesson. The other key feature is modeling thinking. As the example of the 4th grade teacher here suggests, one of the ways to meet the purpose is for the teacher to model his or her thinking for students. Again, modeling thinking should be brief and should result in students' incorporating strategies into their habits. As we noted in the previous section, the focus is on *explaining* and not telling. In the next section, we'll dive deeply into modeling.

Instructional Strategies for Effective Focus Lessons

The three methods used most often in the focus lesson phase are *modeling, metacognitive awareness*, and *think-alouds*. Although closely related, these three techniques serve different purposes. Modeling emphasizes cognition—that is, how a skill, task, or strategy is accomplished. Metacognition extends the cognition through monitoring the use of the content being learned. The final approach, think-alouds, combines cognition and metacognition as the teacher shares how he or she uses both to understand the content. Think-alouds showcase sophisticated levels of knowing because the process gives learners a window into the mind of an expert. Together these represent a gradual release of responsibility across a series of focus lessons.

Modeling

The focus lesson is first and foremost an opportunity to model a task or skill. However, as noted before, modeling can easily devolve into telling rather than teaching. Modeling is different because it follows a precise pattern:

1. *Name the strategy, skill, or task.* "Today I am going to show you how to combine sentences to make more interesting and complex statements."
2. *State the purpose of the strategy, skill, or task.* "It's important as a writer to be able to construct sentences that aren't repetitive or choppy. Sentence combining is one way to make sure your sentences read more smoothly."
3. *Explain when the strategy or skill is used.* "After I have written a passage, I reread it to see if I have choppy sentences or if I am repeating information unnecessarily. When I notice that's occurred, I look for ways to combine sentences."
4. *Use analogies to link prior knowledge to new learning.* "I like to think of this as making sure I make a straight path for my reader to follow. When I eliminate choppy or redundant sentences, it's like making a straight path of ideas for them to follow."
5. *Demonstrate how the skill, strategy, or task is completed.* "I'm going to show you three short, choppy sentences. Let's look first at information that we can cross out because it is repetitive. Then I'm going to combine those three sentences into one longer and more interesting sentence."
6. *Alert learners about errors to avoid.* "I have to be careful not to cut out too much information, so that I don't lose the meaning. I also need to watch out for sentences that become too long. A reader can lose the meaning of a sentence that's too long."
7. *Access the use of the skill.* "Now I'm going to reread my new sentence to see if it makes sense."

When learners have a skill or strategy modeled, and not just merely told, they gain a deeper understanding for when to apply it, what to watch out for, and how to analyze their success. This is consistent with four dimensions of learning: declarative (*What is it?*), procedural (*How do I use it?*), conditional (*When and where do I use it?*), and reflective (*How do I know I used it correctly?*) (Angelo, 1991). You can also see elements of metacognition emerging in the modeling lesson. Students are not just being taught how to do something; they are being primed to analyze the success of their use of what they are learning.

**Direct Explanation.** This modeling technique requires the teacher to state explicitly what a process is and how it is to be used, including a model of how it looks or sounds (Duffy, Roehler, & Rackliffe, 1986). This is accompanied by a clear sequence of instructions that feature consistent use of language and precise terminology. For example, in her geometry class, Ms. Nguyen established the purpose of the lesson, which centered on measuring exterior angles of triangles. She also explained her language goal (to incorporate vocabulary into discussions and proofs) and social goals (to collaborate with peers in a group project). Before asking students to work in groups and solve problems and proofs, she provided a direct explanation of her thinking. She read the definition of the theorem: "The measure of an exterior angle of a triangle is equal to the sum of the measures of the two nonadjacent interior angles." She then explained her understanding of the theorem:

I know that "sum" is to add up. It's the answer when we add something up. I also know that "nonadjacent" means "not next to." *Non* means "not," and *adjacent* means "next to or near." So, this theorem is saying to me that the measure of the exterior angle—this one [she points to an exterior angle]—is equal to the sum of the two that are not directly next to the exterior angle I'm trying to figure out. I also know that some people call the nonadjacent angles remote interior angles, but that doesn't really help me here.

She then looks at a problem: "In Δ*PQR*, *m*∠*Q* = 45°, and *m*∠*R* = 72°. Find the measure of an exterior angle at *P*." Again, she shares her thinking through direct explanation.

Okay, so I know that one angle is 45° and the other one is 72°. Wait, I don't have to do this in my head. It is always helpful to draw a diagram and label it with the given information. Let's see, I'll label the triangle like this and see if it helps. Yes, it does. Now I can see which are nonadjacent angles and which I need to solve. Easy, now it's just a calculation problem. I'm ready for another.

She continues this way through two more examples and then moves into guided instruction, first with the whole class and then with small groups. While she does so, she provides students in their collaborative learning groups proofs to work on and reminds them to use the academic vocabulary they have learned in their discussions and on the proof pages.

**Demonstration.** Think of the times you have tuned in to a television show to watch a demonstration of a complicated process you were interested in learning. It may have been a show on making a soufflé, or redecorating a living room, or casting a fly fishing rod, but in all cases it was accompanied by the narration of an expert who explained what he or she was doing. The combination of verbal and visual elements reinforced the most salient features of the task.

Ms. Lattner has begun a watercolor painting unit in her middle school art class. Her students need to learn how to stretch the paper correctly in order to have a satisfactory result with their final product. She begins by naming all the materials she will need for the task, including watercolor paper, art tape, clean water and two sponges, and a board for mounting the paper.

The first thing I need to do is check to make sure I have the side of the paper I want to use facing up. I can paint on either side, but I like to use the rougher side of the paper because it seems to hold my paint better. I can run my hand over both sides of the paper to figure out which side is rougher. The paper needs to soak in the water for a few minutes, so I am going to place it in the pan and set the timer for three minutes. That way I won't forget. I used tepid water, which means water that is around room temperature, in the pan. Hot water can ruin the paper. While it is soaking, I'll cut the strips of tape I'll need to mount the paper on the board. I have to make sure that the tape isn't shorter than the length of each side. If it is, the paper will dry funny, and I'll have a big bubble in it.

After the timer rings, Ms. Lattner continues.

I'm going to be careful as I lift the paper because I want as much water as possible to drain off it. I can't put a sopping wet paper on the board, or it will take forever for it to dry.

She holds the paper above the pan to allow the excess water to drain.

I think that's as much water as I'm going to get off of the paper that way. I've been watching the amount of water dripping in the pan, and it has slowed down to almost nothing. I know I can get water off another way. I'm going to lay the paper down on the board and use this sponge to smooth it. I've checked the sponge to make sure it's clean, and now I'm going to smooth it using long strokes across the paper. The sponge absorbs water as it smooths. Now that the paper is smooth, I need to tape it down. This tape gets sticky on one side, but only after it gets wet. I use a brown sponge for wetting the tape, so that I never mix up my smoothing sponges with my taping ones. You know why? Because that sticky stuff from the tape gets on the sponge. If I accidentally use that sponge later for smoothing, I'll get it all over the paper, and it will be ruined.

The teacher places the tape on all four edges of the paper and affixes it to the wooden board.

Now it's done! It needs to dry overnight, and when I check it tomorrow, it will be very tight and smooth. As the paper dries, it contracts, which means it gets a bit smaller. The tape holds it in place, so the contraction of the paper stretches it tight. When I paint on it, the surface will be smooth, and it won't crinkle up as I apply the watercolors to it.

This demonstration included not only the sequence of steps but also insights into how decisions are made about when to go on to the next step. In addition, Ms. Lattner carefully noted the errors to avoid when completing this task.

Teaching for Metacognitive Awareness

A second aspect of a successful focus lesson is teaching for meta-cognitive awareness. This is defined as the learner's mindful acknowledgment of his or her own learning processes, the conditions under which he or she learns best, and a recognition that learning has occurred. Metacognitive awareness is truly a lifelong phenomenon and is therefore not taught in a handful of lessons. Instead, it is something that teachers must return to again and again. This is accomplished through focus lessons that provide students with time to recognize that learning has occurred and under what conditions. Therefore, focus lessons with a metacognitive component ask students to analyze how they are applying a strategy.

Anderson (2002) has developed a series of four questions that challenge learners to move from cognition to metacognition. We will expand on each of these questions. We post these questions on the board at the beginning of a focus lesson and write the answers as we move through the lesson.

1. *"What am I trying to accomplish?"* This first question moves the learners from merely copying a task to analyzing the outcomes. We've long heard the reminder to "begin with the end in mind" (Covey, 2004, p. 65). Therefore, we pose this question and answer it for our students. "This math word problem is asking me to figure out how many people can be served with the number of apple pies at the picnic."
2. *"What strategies am I using?"* After identifying the problem and the goal, the next step is to figure out what strategies can be used to achieve a solution. "I really need to use two strategies to find the answer. First, I have to multiply the number of slices by the total number of pies. That will give me the total number of servings. But then I also have to divide those servings among the people at the picnic."
3. *"How well am I using the strategies?"* Once again, monitoring plays an important role in the acquisition of new learning. The answer to this question shows students that control of a skill or strategy comes from pausing from time to time during the process to see whether it's working. "Before I divide, I need to check to see if what I've multiplied makes sense. Could it be that 8 apple pies could be cut into a total of 64 slices? I also want to check my math. Does 8 times 8 equal 64?"
4. *"What else could I do?"* The goal of this question is to teach students to think flexibly, rather than allow themselves to be bogged down in the rigid thinking that often comes with a new skill. It is common at this stage of learning for students to temporarily forget that they have learned other skills or strategies previously. Remind them that those familiar strategies have a role. "I'm still not sure I am doing this correctly. One way I can be sure is if I draw a diagram of the pies and the people. We've done that before when we've had tough word problems. I'm going to try that now."

Notice how the metacognitive awareness focus lesson differs from modeling and how it represents a gradual release of responsibility within this phase of instruction. In the metacognition focus lesson, the emphasis shifts to direct instruction on a framework for making decisions about the use of the skill or strategy. Students have already had a focus lesson or two on how to perform these operations. They are now ready to see how to examine ways to prepare and plan, select an approach, and monitor the execution of their plan (Anderson, 2002). The teacher has shifted away from the step-by-step instruction during the modeling phase; there is less attention on direct explanation and demonstration.

**Public Problem Solving.** Novices have difficulty bridging the "how" of new learning to the "where" and "when" of using the skill or strategy. Public problem solving is a demonstration of the metacognitive processes an expert engages in, as the teacher makes his or her thinking transparent to learners.

Ms. Dykstra's 1st grade students have been reading a passage in their social studies textbooks about representative and direct democracies. She knows this is a challenging concept for 7-year-olds and wants to use this opportunity to show how she untangles this confusion.

When I was reading that last section, I got those two ideas all jumbled up in my head. I thought I understood, but when I tried to restate it in my head, I realized I didn't have it yet. So I looked back in the book to help myself. The first thing I did was look for the bolded words. I remember there were bolded words and that there was a definition in the same sentence. I reread that to myself, and this time I did it as a whisper-read so I could hear myself.

She quietly reads the sentences aloud.

That helped, I think. I am going to check myself to be sure. I'll close my book and see if I can say it in my own words. "A direct democracy means everyone gets to vote. A representative democracy means people choose someone to do the voting for them." Now I'm going to check my answer with the book to see if I am right.

Ms. Dykstra shows her students throughout the day how she evaluates her own learning through monitoring and checking. She also reinforces strategies she has taught them previously by showing them when she applies them, such as rereading, finding bolded words, and reading aloud to herself when she runs into difficult text.

**Think-alouds.** Application is the end goal of a series of focus lessons, as focus lessons prepare learners for assuming more of the cognitive load needed in guided, collaborative, and independent learning. A think-aloud process provides the chance for the teacher to combine the cognition introduced through modeling with the thinking skills introduced through the metacognitive awareness lessons. The key to an effective think-aloud is that the teacher is using the first person to describe how he or she makes decisions, implements skills, activates problem-solving protocols, and evaluates whether success has been achieved. Importantly, this is a chance for students to witness how an expert merges declarative, procedural, conditional, and reflective knowledge in a fluent fashion. Fisher and Frey (2007b) describe five key considerations in crafting an effective think-aloud:

* *Keep the focus of the think-aloud tight and brief.* It is easy to get carried away with a think-aloud, allowing it to turn into a rambling monologue of every thought that wanders through your head. Choose a short piece of written text, a single math word problem, or one example of a process. It is better to deliver a short but effective think-aloud than one that serves only to confuse the learner with too many details.
* *Pay attention to your own thinking processes as you design your think-aloud.* This is really very difficult when you are an expert at something. Nathan and Petrosino (2003) state that "well-developed subject matter knowledge can lead people to assume that learning should follow the structure of the subject-matter domain rather than the learning needs and developmental profiles of novices"—a phenomenon they call the "expert blind spot" (p. 906). In other words, when you've been very adept at something for a long time, it can be difficult to retrace your own learning footsteps to recall a time when this information was new to you. A successful think-aloud requires you to unpack your own thinking processes to understand how you arrive at understanding.
* *Find your authentic voice when you think aloud.* This approach requires lots of "I" statements, which can feel contrived when you first begin. As teachers, it seems more comfortable to tell students, using lots of "you" statements. The problem with those statements is that our instruction reverts to direct explanation, rather than making the thinking of an expert transparent. It is useful to find an informal style and to resist adopting an overly academic voice. Your students will find it more helpful to hear you say, "Wow—when I first looked at this diagram of the solar system, I thought right away about what it didn't have in the illustration, like the asteroid belt and the dwarf planets," rather than, "I analyzed the diagram for the visual information it contained and immediately noted the small solar system bodies it did not contain."
* *Think like the expert you are.* Keeping a think-aloud authentic doesn't mean you have to check your expertise at the door. As a content area expert, you have the ability to share unique insights with your students. Effective think-alouds give you the opportunity to think like a mathematician, a scientist, an artist, a historian, an athlete, or a literary critic in front of your students.
* *Name your cognitive and metacognitive processes.* Labeling is critical if students are to build their own metacognitive awareness. Tell them when you are using the associative property of multiplication or making a text-to-text connection for reading comprehension—these are cognitive approaches you are teaching your students to use. In addition, signal your metacognition as you problem solve ("That didn't work, so I have to try a different formula"), acquire new knowledge ("That's something I didn't know until I read this article"), and regulate your learning ("I know that I usually understand an editorial better when I know who's written it, so I always look at the writer's affiliation first").

Keep in mind that the goal of a think-aloud is to let novices in on how an expert synthesizes skills and habits of mind.

**Shared Reading.** Holdaway (1979) pioneered this instructional approach as a way to bring the positive effects of story reading at home into the primary classroom. It has evolved into a practice that allows teachers to model how they apply reading comprehension strategies to text. In the past decade it has become a staple of secondary content classrooms as teachers use the dense informational readings of the course to show students how they understand the content. A key feature of a shared reading is the students' access to the text. Most commonly, the reading is projected on an overhead projector or with a document camera so that students can follow along as the teacher reads. Many teachers like to give students their own paper copy of the reading as well. Notice who is bearing the cognitive load—it is the teacher who is doing the reading, while students follow along silently. The teacher pauses throughout the reading to think aloud about the information and to explain his or her own mental processes in understanding the text.

Tenth grade biology teacher Mr. Brownlee has been teaching a unit about human immune response, and his students have been struggling with understanding the role of phagocytes in fighting disease. He reads, "Phagocytes destroy any foreign body, including the debris and dead cells produced by injury. It overwhelms the injured areas and engulfs the foreign bodies through a process called phagocytosis." Mr. Brownlee knows this statement contains a number of concepts that are easily misunderstood, so he pauses to think aloud:

When I first learned about phagocytes, I couldn't really get my head around what they did. Then my biology professor told me that *phagocyte* means "a cell that eats." That helped me understand a bit more. A phagocyte doesn't eat like we do, but it swallows up the garbage that shouldn't be there. There's a word in that sentence that confirms my recollection of that idea. The word *engulf* means "to swallow something up, to surround it." Now I can connect that to one more idea in that sentence—phagocytosis. Anytime I see a word that ends in *-osis*, it's a signal to me that it is a process. So phagocytosis is the process used by a phagocyte, a cell that eats, to swallow up anything it thinks shouldn't belong there. I had to take that sentence apart to understand it, and I did it by analyzing the derivations of a science term, then confirming my understanding using other terms in the sentence.

Mr. Brownlee combines both cognition and metacognition to show his students how he understands this informational text as a biologist. He is also explicit in naming the strategies he activated so as not to leave it to chance whether his students would notice (or not).

**Write-alouds.** Another instructional approach we use often in our classrooms is writing aloud in front of students. It is said that writing is the most complex of the elements of literacy (reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing) because it is built upon all of the others. After all, writing represents ideas that are formulated through oral exchanges and listening to others as well as reading. The writer must command all of these processes with a measure of fluency in order to get it on the paper. In our view, writing aloud, which entails thinking aloud as one writes, is essential for improving writing among students.

The students in Ms. Ramachandran's 3rd grade classroom have been doing an author study of the works of Beverly Cleary. Groups of students have worked in literature circles (Daniels, 2001) that have collectively selected books by this prolific author. Students will select one of the titles and will compose a review for submission to the [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) Web site for others to see. Ms. Ramachandran knows that this complex task requires lots of instruction, and she has already done focus lessons on the elements of a good book review and the considerations for a good submission to the Web site, such as length and tone. She is now composing in front of her students, writing aloud as she develops a review of *A Girl from Yamhill* (Cleary, 1996), the book she read as part of the author study.

My book was an autobiography of part of Beverly Cleary's life, and she wrote about her childhood and how she started writing her first book. It's going to be important to say that in my review, so that customers will know what it is about. Wait, I should write down some of these ideas so that I don't forget. That's brainstorming, when you make a list of ideas. I am going to write "autobiography" and "childhood" on my list. I am also going to add "writes her first book." [She writes a list on chart paper.]

After brainstorming and noting ideas on her list, Ms. Ramachandran begins to compose.

I'm going to start my review with a sentence about what the book is about, so that the customers will know just a bit about it. "*A Girl from Yamhill* is an autobiography by …"—wait, I'm changing that—"written by Beverly Cleary about her childhood in Oregon."

As she speaks, the teacher writes the words on the chart paper.

I'm checking my brainstorming list to see if there is anything else I want to add. Yes, I wanted to put this in about how she wrote her first book. "The author also tells …"—I have a better word than that—"describes the time when she wrote her very first book." Now I need to reread what I've written so far to see if it makes sense.

She reads her first two sentences aloud and continues writing.

I wrote, "*A Girl from Yamhill* is an autobiography written by Beverly Cleary about her childhood in Oregon. The author also describes the time when she wrote her very first book." I'm checking for capitalization and punctuation, and it looks like I've done everything correctly. Now I have to add some sentences about my opinion of this book, because that's the purpose of a book review. Then I'll finish with recommendations.

This teacher's write-aloud captures the dynamics of writing. Many novices falsely believe that writing is a continuous laying down of sentences, word by word. Writing aloud in front of her students lets them witness the thinking processes used by a writer, including the editing she engages in from nearly the beginning of her piece.

Formative Assessments in Focus Lessons

Every phase of instruction must be accompanied by a means of checking for understanding, beginning with the focus lesson. This is most commonly done through oral and written summaries. With younger children, we usually have them "turn to a partner" to restate or summarize what they have just learned. We listen in to conversations and make notes on a transparency of what we have overheard. These notes are projected onto the screen, and we discuss the accuracy and completeness of the conversations ("Anthony and Tre: Our classroom is a direct democracy because everyone has a vote, but our student council is a representative democracy because we elect leaders to vote for us"). This is an excellent way to find out what they understood—and misunderstood—which provides direction for the next lesson.

Several social and language goals are achieved at the same time. Partner talk allows us to promote social relationships among students and is particularly useful for English language learners who may be reluctant to participate in whole-class discussions. At the same time, it provides novices with an opportunity to use the academic language of the content in their retelling. An example of this is when Ms. Nguyen, the geometry teacher, checked for understanding and told students the terminology they needed to use in their explanation. Finally, this procedure gives us a chance to build community in the classroom. We will often share the thinking of some of the quieter members of the class to build their social capital. Older students don't always appreciate the attention, so we usually place their comments anonymously. They enjoy the recognition privately, while we still get to put good ideas out there in the class for everyone to consider.

This process works equally well in writing. A "ticket out the door" (Fisher & Frey, 2007b) is written during the last few minutes of the class period and handed to the teacher on the way out of the classroom. The teacher can quickly skim through the summaries to determine what, if anything, needs to be retaught the following day. This can also be done using other writing forms, including drawings and diagrams. Ms. Lattner asked her students to illustrate the steps of stretching watercolor paper; then she returned these illustrations the following day so they could refer to their directions as they performed the task.

Conclusion

There are many ways to establish purpose, model thinking, demonstrate skills, and teach for metacognition; we have listed only a few. Recall that the essential features of focus lessons include modeling and direct explanation of the skills, strategies, or tasks being taught. This is followed by teacher-led metacognitive awareness lessons that show students when and how to use new learning, as well as how to evaluate the success of the approach they have selected. Finally, these cognitive and meta-cognitive processes are merged through think-alouds, time when the teacher is demonstrating how both are used in a fluent and coherent manner.